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A Lovely Evolution

Amanda Clemens

Vanessa sat at the kitchen table and waited for her husband's morning ritual to begin. As she thought of how predictable Rory was, she couldn't help but smile into her coffee cup. She glanced at the clock and sighed. She was always awake before Rory, but lately, she had been waking much earlier than usual and faithfully took her place at the kitchen table where she would wait until she heard the shower start, which would prompt her to start the coffee pot again and to set out the breakfast dishes. She hated those dishes. The same thing everyday, a blue floral pattern around white Corelle plates. Every day she put them on the table for breakfast and dinner. Every night she put them into and took them out of the dishwasher. She looked out the window, waited for the shower and continued to think about the plates for which she felt such contempt.

Rory wanted to throw his alarm clock out of the window. Despite the fact that his alarm had been set for the same time since he had attended college, everyday for what had seemed like weeks, his body fought to stay asleep. But he couldn't fall asleep at night. He would lie in bed next to his wife and think about his job and his classes, utterly unable to fall into any stage of sleep. But most of all, he thought about dinner: how every night he would come home from work and find Vanessa in the kitchen, grading papers while she cooked dinner, usually burning any kind of bread she ever attempted to make. As he envisioned the dumbfounded look on her face that made it seem like she had never burned anything before, he couldn't help but smile into the darkness. But as he remembered this, the memory was tarnished with how very much he hated their kitchen. Vanessa had let his mother decorate it as a wedding present. She had given it a country theme with white walls and blue trim. Useless antique odds and ends cluttered their counters to give it a "rustic" feel. Rory hated those knickknacks but knew how much the kitchen, being the only truly decorated room, had meant to Vanessa when they first moved into their home. But what he hated most, and always wanted to smash against the wall were the dishes that she had given them—plates that matched the walls. Until he finally drifted off, his thoughts were always speckled with the fantasy of smashing those plates at dinner the next day.

It had been four years since their wedding but neither Rory nor Vanessa audibly remembered. It wasn't until Rory had begun to look for an art history book on Gaudi for one of his art students on a bookshelf in their shared office that he glanced at the frame on the wall that held their marriage license. It was an antique frame and looked especially old in the early morning light, covered in dust. Their anniversary was the next day. He had already known this but had not yet mentioned it to Vanessa, nor she to him. He wondered if he should buy Vanessa a present. His train of thought was cut short by his insecurities that she wouldn't remember and he would look foolish. He quickly dismissed the idea and went about his day. As he set up his studio to continue working on his latest

painting, he pulled out all his supplies, including a tiny picture frame that he kept at the bottom of his easel whenever he was working. But this time something stopped him, and he pulled the photo close to have a better look at it.

Paint splattered and dented, the frame looked like it had been through hell, but the picture was still as beautiful as ever. Vanessa was looking directly into the camera and laughing, the look on her face pure ecstasy. Rory had taken it as a surprise. Right after they had been pronounced man and wife, he pulled his old camera from his pocket and announced to the crowd "Sorry folks, this is too beautiful to pass up." As his memory came to an end, he wiped away his tears and put the photo in its place. Vanessa would forever be both his muse and his true love, no matter how distant she became to him.

Vanessa had bought a new dress: a pale, ocean blue sundress that made her blue eyes glow and her blonde hair shine like gold. It was perfect for the late August heat and would surely catch Rory's eye. While she was shopping, she thought of their anniversary the following day. What if he had forgotten? How could he? He was the one that insisted on their marriage license being framed. She continued to worry that he would forget as she went through the grocery store buying all the ingredients for mostaccioli and garlic bread, the first meal she had ever cooked for him. As she reached the checkout, she suddenly realized that Rory probably wouldn't even be home for dinner the next day, especially if he didn't remember the significance of the day. She herself had only recalled it that very morning. In a sudden flight of panic, Vanessa left her groceries there, in the line for the cashier, and walked numbly out to her car.

She drove home and sat idling in the streets as she watched Rory move around the house, cleaning and working in his studio. She realized that she had no idea what he was working on. She used to be his muse, posing for him and keeping him company in the studio. Now she was an outsider looking in. Vanessa wondered when that had happened, when she and Rory had pulled apart. Did it happen before or after she slipped on their stairs and went to the hospital? She shut her mind to those sad and dreary thoughts and forced herself to move. She pulled into the driveway and made herself stop crying before she went inside. As she thawed the chicken breast for dinner in the microwave, she watched it spin and thought of how strange it was to still want to be near someone who continually pulled himself away from her. She took off her wedding band and wistfully looked at the inscription, "True Love," the only plausible reason why she would ever want to stay.

As Rory lay next to his wife that night and listened to the melodic sounds of her breathing, he realized that he could not remember the last time they had kissed. Kissing Vanessa had once been his favorite part of walking through their door at night. He began to wonder why he had stopped doing so every night. He thought of all the excuses he could make for his neglect of affection: he brought much more work home with him now and his hands were full, she had changed

the spot where she graded papers across the room from the door, or even that they had grown out of the honeymoon stage in their relationship. He continued to mull over these excuses all the while ignoring the tugging sensation in the pit of his stomach that reminded him that he was ignoring the real reason behind their behavior shift. Deep down he knew that everything in their relationship would always come back to the baby. The immensity of the effects that such a small being could have on a relationship was amazing and Rory knew that no matter how many books he read or therapists he spoke to he would never be able to completely mend the rift that separated Vanessa and himself. Deeply saddened by this realization, he gently leaned over and kissed his wife, wishing for a way to make her love him again.

Vanessa woke up with a smile on her face and for a moment was quite disoriented. Something about this particular morning was different. She had mixed emotions as she realized that everything was different because she had awoken in Rory's arms. Feelings of familiarity and an awkward strangeness intertwined themselves around Vanessa's heart, causing her to want to stay and leave simultaneously. She lay in his arms a few minutes before gently getting off the bed. She glanced back and saw that Rory too had a smile on his sleeping face. She walked down the hall past the closed door and stopped. Something made her turn around and open that door. It was the baby's room. Or what was intended to be the baby's room. Vanessa felt the tears come to her eyes as she touched her stomach. It had been nearly two years since she had lost their baby. Not a day went by when she didn't imagine what her life could have been like if she hadn't been in such a hurry to leave and slipped on the icy steps. She knew that she had not only lost her baby in that moment, but her husband and her world. She left the room and went back to the bedroom. She leaned over the bed and kissed Rory like she had neglected to do so since that day. In a single moment she had found the determination to win her husband back and to take control of her life. No therapist or book could have ever helped her come to that conclusion. As Rory awoke and smiled at her, she smiled back, said good morning and went downstairs to cook breakfast.

Rory had never been so confused in his life. He felt as if he was in a dream. His fingers touched his lips where Vanessa's had been only seconds before. He skipped his normal morning routine and slowly walked down the stairs. He saw Vanessa standing at the stove making eggs. He walked over to the table and sat down, still reeling about how she had kissed him. He picked up his plate and looked at his reflection in the pristine white surface. Vanessa turned around and smiled at him. He felt it slipping but did not try to catch it. The plate shattered on the floor. As she made her way over the table Rory only expected the worst. He had clearly ruined this moment for them. But, she picked up the plate and dropped it on the floor, smiled at him again, and said, "I have always hated those plates." Rory quickly stood up and took her in his arms. He whispered, "Happy Anniversary, Baby" in her ears as he held her close to him.